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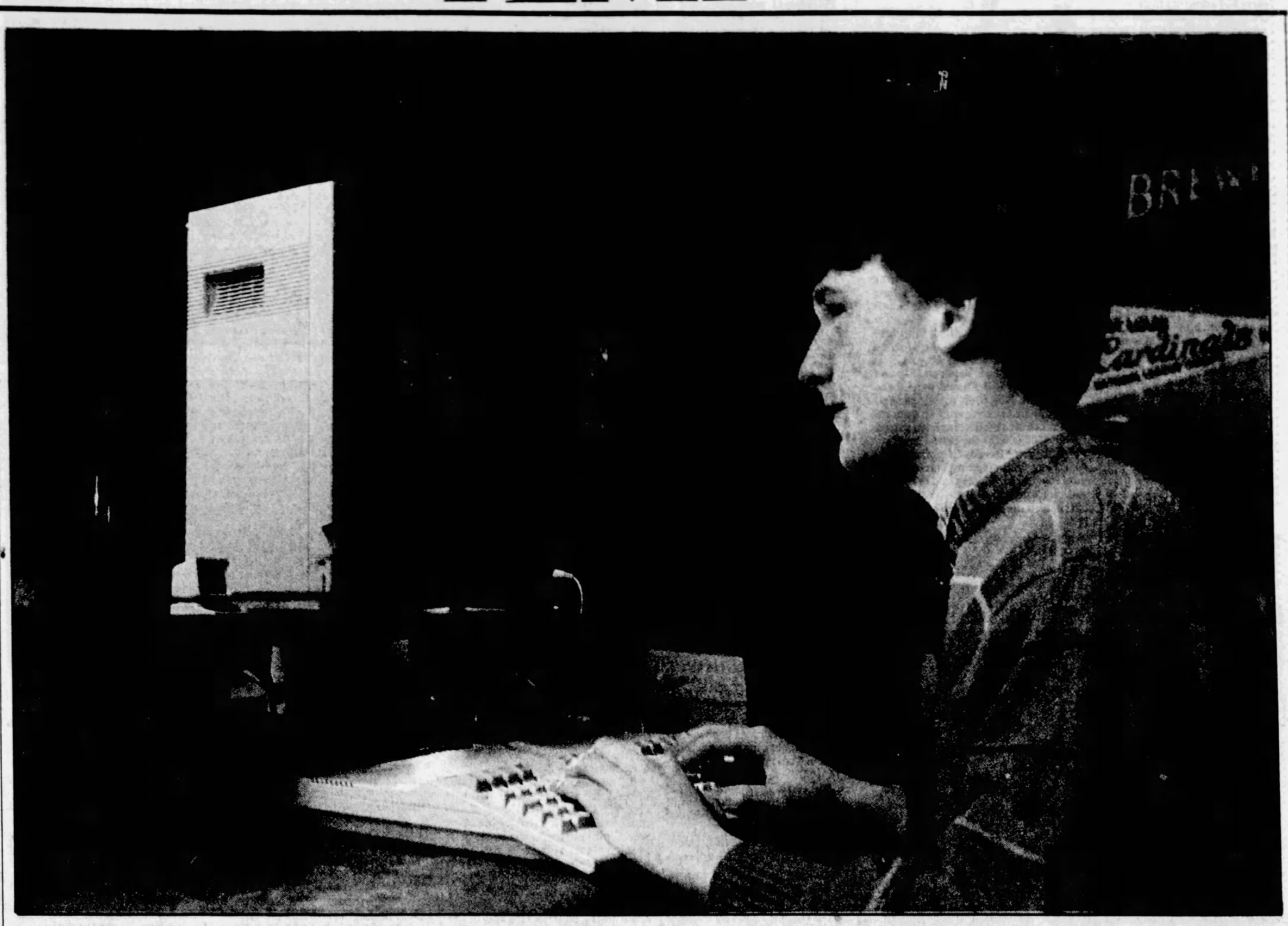

Gary Barr operates a computer bulletin board from his home.

Courier photo by Bill Adkins

HIGH-TECH TALK

By GREGORY WEAVER
Courier staff writer

Want to chat with a stranger without speaking? How about co-writing a story with 50 other would-be authors? Interested in leaving a message without talking to an annoying answering machine?

Computerized bulletin boards offer all of these things and more. All that is needed is a personal computer and a modem — a device that lets computers communicate over telephone lines.

Bulletin boards have been operating in Evansville for about three years. The city's first one closed when the systems operator — or "sysop" — found that the service was time-consuming and too expensive.

But some die-hard computer users in the area have managed to keep at least eight bulletin boards running. And hundreds of people gradually have turned to the bulletin boards for information and conversation.

Bulletin boards sometimes are dismissed as a teenage fad, but Evansville's longest-running one is operated by two men in their 30s.

Brad Callahan and Dave Jenkins of Evansville Connection bulletin board said that most users of their board are teens but their callers over the past 2½ years have ranged from pre-adolescents to retirees.

"There really is something for everyone on these boards," said Callahan, a data processing officer at Old National Bank.

"It's just that teen-agers usually are the first to discover them. They're all part of the computer age. They all know that, and they get on the boards to learn as much about computers as they can."

The "chat" mode is one of the most popular features for users. It allows them to summon the systems operator to his computer keyboard. Then, the caller and sysop can chat by typing messages that are sent simultaneously between their two computers via telephone.

A computer in Gary Barr's bedroom chimes whenever users of his Digicom bulletin board want to chat with him. Because the board operates 24 hours a day, the chimes occasionally wake him.

"That can get on your nerves sometimes," said Barr, a Reitz High School junior. "But for the most part, it's great fun.

"It's a way to meet people and get to know them without ever seeing them or hearing their voice. And that makes it kind of mysterious, adventurous and educational, too."

Jenkins, an engineer at WNIN-Ch. 9, said Evansville Connection users became so curious about one another that they started having an annual summer picnic so they could meet one another face to face.

"That's an enlightening experience.

"By reading notes that a person leaves you on the board, you think you have a feel for what they're like. Then when you meet them, your whole mental image can be blown away," he said.

Telephone numbers for bulletin boards are spread across the country by frequent users and in books such as "The Computer Phone Book" written by Mike Cane.

Consequently, local sysops have gotten calls from people on the East and West coasts. And they occasionally call out-of-state bulletin boards to find new concepts that they might try on their own boards.

Barr has been revising the computer program for his bulletin board since he finished writing it nearly two years ago. He said he always seems to be adding another message base for a special-interest group or finding a new issue on which to poll his users.

One concept that seems to be gaining in popularity among bulletin boards, Barr said, is introducing a story that other users can embellish. His board recently had a "Star Trek" story in which users could determine what would happen next to the characters.

One inconvenience of operating a bulletin board is monitoring it for pranksters who leave off-color messages, the sysops said.

The problem can be solved by denying access to users who leave such messages — an easy process because each board requires a password before allowing a caller full access.

Keith Bobbitt, who operates West Terrace Bulletin Board, said charging users an annual $10 fee also eliminates troublemakers. People tend not to spend money on joining a bulletin board if all they want to do is wreck the service, he said.

Bobbitt, a music and computer teacher at West Terrace School, said his bulletin board is not affiliated with the school. He said he named his service after the school because that's where his interest in bulletin boards was piqued.

Actually, Barr got Bobbitt interested in bulletin boards. Barr attended West Terrace.

As an eighth-grader, Barr frequently talked to Bobbitt about writing a computer program to set up a board. Bobbitt said those conversations persuaded him to buy the computer software to establish the West Terrace Bulletin Board.

"It was something I was interested in and it was something I thought people around here might like to be exposed to," said Bobbitt, 43.

Sixty-four users now pay for his service, which offers the on-line games and program-swapping common among bulletin boards. It also has an on-line magazine produced in Topeka, Kan., that reviews computer software.

"If you have a personal computer and you don't have a modem, you're missing out on a lot," Bobbitt said. "For $30 or so you can get a modem that can bring a whole new world right to your house."

Here is a list of Evansville-area bulletin boards, their telephone numbers and hours:

- **Blue Board,** 476-1482, 10 p.m. Friday to 5 a.m. Saturday and 10 p.m. Saturday to 5 a.m. Sunday.
- **Digicom,** 985-9443, 24 hours a day
- **Dragon's Bane,** 428-4985, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. weekdays and 24 hours a day on weekends.
- **Evansville Connection,** 476-9453, 24 hours a day.
- **Midwest Computer Service,** 429-0017, 6 p.m. to 9 a.m. daily.
- **Nightline,** 853-3929, 10 p.m. Friday to 5 a.m. Saturday and 10 p.m. Saturday to 5 a.m. Sunday.
- **Star Base,** 423-4535, 24 hours.
- **West Terrace,** 985-2083, 24 hours.

Case sends 'phreaking' message

Illegal long-distance access codes on bulletin boards carry high price

By GREGORY WEAVER
Courier staff writer

Most computer services are legitimate, authorities agree. But computer enthusiasts say headlines about computer fraud catapult only the illegal ones into public consciousness.

Tony Neal Freels knows about both kinds. He said he enjoyed the camaraderie of talking with other computer tinkerers by way of bulletin boards.

The 20-year-old student at Henderson Community College said he was devastated when he and an acquaintance were prosecuted last year for using pirated long-distance telephone access codes and passing them along to others.

Federal authorities said the illegal codes were distributed via an illegitimate board called "Blue Beard's Den," operated by Freels' acquaintance, W. Christopher Johnston, at his home in Henderson, Ky.

Now Freels and Johnston each have a federal felony conviction after pleading guilty to conspiring to commit wire fraud. And TelaMarketing Communications of Evansville, the long-distance company that suffered from their exploits, has improved security to prevent hackers from breaking into their computer system.

The problem is so widespread that long-distance services have formed the Communications Fraud Control Association, based in Fairfax, Va., to combat it.

Gaston Sigur, a consultant for the association, conceded that computer hackers are not the only cause of telephone fraud. But they are part of a problem that causes long-distance companies in the United States to lose about $500 million annually, he said.

Phil Sheridan, Evansville-area manager for TelaMarketing, estimated that his company lost $125,000 between March 1984 and March 1986 because of the Henderson scam alone.

Communications companies have been "easy prey" for experienced hackers because home computers easily can be programmed to randomly try long-distance access codes and re-call those that work, Sigur said.

But beefed-up security and closer monitoring of calls are making those exploits more difficult, Sheridan said. The sharing of information among members of the fraud control association also has helped, Sigur said.

The practice of making long-distance calls at someone else's expense is known as "phreaking."

FBI agent Robert L. Brannon Jr. said few "phreakers" think it is illegal.

"It's more like a contest or game to them," said Brannon, who investigated the Johnston and Freels case. "They each try to outdo the other's exploits. They want to see who can be the most daring."

Freels said curiosity more than anything else led him to try the illegal access codes.

"If you see that kind of illegal stuff on a board, you're just curious to try it.

"Anybody's going to be curious to try it. But I know from experience that you shouldn't. You may think that nobody's going to get hurt by it, but they do," he said.

The investigation into Henderson hackers is continuing because as many as 70 teen-agers may have used the illegal access codes on Johnston's board before it was shut down by federal authorities in October 1984.

Meanwhile, Brannon said he hopes the prosecution of Johnston and Freels will discourage others.

Johnston declined to be interviewed.

He and Freels were ordered to serve 60-day sentences on work release and make monthly payments to TelaMarketing for the more than $6,000 in illegal calls that they made.

They also were ordered to complete 100 hours of community service and are expected to give court-ordered talks this month to high school students in Henderson and Owensboro, Ky., about the perils of participating in telephone scams, said federal probation officer Ron Smith.

Gary Barr, a 16-year-old Reitz High School junior who operates a bulletin board in Evansville, said the Henderson case has cast a shadow on boards that offer legitimate services and information.

"Just because one board is bad, doesn't mean that all of them are," he said. "But sometimes people think that way."

Brannon said most bulletin boards are legitimate. But computer enthusiasts still should be watchful for boards that offer illegal information, he said.

Freels warned that computer users should be particularly leery of services that offer free access up to a certain level and then ask for a fee to get to the "good stuff."

"Most of the bulletin boards are free, but some of them ask for a $10 fee maybe for higher access," Freels said. "That's something to watch out for because if you're going to find phreaking or something like that, that's probably where it will be."

Freels' probation officer likened bulletins boards to guns or knives.

"They're all powerful tools, and if used correctly, they can helpful," he said. "But if you abuse them, someone is bound to get hurt."

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